Puritan New England

If survival in the Chesapeake required junking many European notions about social arrangements and submitting to the dictates of the wilderness, was this also true in Massachusetts and Connecticut? Ultimately it probably was, but at first puritan ideas certainly fought the New England reality to a draw.

Boston is located slightly more than 5 degrees latitude north of Jamestown and almost 10 degrees north of Charleston. Like other early New England towns and unlike these southern ones, Boston had a dependable water supply. The surrounding patchwork of forest, pond, dunes, and tide marsh was much more open than the malaria-infected terrain of the tidewater and low-country South. As a consequence New Englanders escaped "the agues and fevers" that beset settlers to the south, leaving them free to attend to their spiritual, economic, and social well-being. These differences alone made New England a much healthier habitat for settlers.

The Puritan Family

New England's puritans were set apart from other English settlers by how much - and how long - they lived out of their baggage. The supplies the first arrivals brought with them eased their adjustment, as did the wherewithal of later, equally heavily laden arrivals. The puritans' baggage, however, included besides pots and pans, and saws and shovels, a plan for the proper ordering of society.

At the center of the plan was a covenant, or agreement, to ensure the upright behavior of all who took up residence. They sought to provide what John Winthrop described to the passengers on the Arbella as the imperative of human existence: "that every man might have need of other, and from hence they might be all knitt more nearly together in the Bond of brotherly affection."

The first and most important covenant governing puritan behavior was that binding family members. The family's authority was backed by the Fifth Commandment: "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land." In a properly ordered puritan family, as elsewhere in the colonies, authority flowed downward. Sociologists describe such a
family as nuclear and patriarchal; each household contained one family, and in it, the father was boss. His principal responsibilities consisted of providing for the physical welfare of the household, including any servants, and making sure they behaved properly. All economic dealings between the family and other parties were also transacted by him, even when the property involved had been owned by his wife prior to their marriage.

The Reverend John Cotton's outline of a woman's responsibilities clearly establishes her subordinate position: she should keep house, educate the children, and improve "what is got by the industry of the man." The poet Anne Bradstreet reduced the functions of a puritan woman to two: "loving Mother and obedient Wife." Colonial New England, and the southern colonies as well, did have their female blacksmiths, silversmiths, shipwrights, gunsmiths, and butchers as well as shopkeepers and teachers. Such early examples of domestic "liberation," however, were mostly widows and the wives of incapacitated husbands. Even so, most widows, especially young ones, quickly remarried.

**Puritan Women and Children**

Dealings with neighbors and relatives and involvement in church activities marked the outer limits of the social range of most puritan women. Care of the children was a full-time occupation when broods of 12 or 14 were more common than those of 1 or 2. Fewer children died in New England than in the Chesapeake or in Europe, though few families escaped a miscarriage or a child's death along the way. Childbearing and motherhood, therefore, commonly extended over three decades of a woman's life. Meanwhile, she also functioned as the chief operating officer of the household. Cooking, baking, sewing, and supervising servants, as well as mastering such arcane knowledge as the chemistry needed to make cheese from milk, bacon from pork, bread from grain, and beer from malt, all fell to her. These jobs were physically demanding, though not so debilitating as to prevent large numbers of New England wives from seeing one or more husbands off to the hereafter.

As puritan social standards required husbands to rule over wives, so parents ruled over children. The virtue most insistently impressed on New England children was obedience; refusal to submit to parental direction was disturbing in itself and for what it implied about the child's
eternal condition. Cotton Mather's advice, "better whipt, than damned," graced many a New England rod taken up by a parent in anger, from there to be rapidly transferred to the afterparts of misbehaving offspring. But household chores kept children out of mischief. By age six or seven girls did sewing and helped with housework and boys were put to work outdoors. Older children might be sent to live with another family to work as servants or apprentices.

Such practices, particularly when set beside portraits of early New England families that depict toddlers as somber-faced miniature adults wearing clothes indistinguishable from those of their parents, may convey the impression that puritans hustled their young through childhood with as little love as possible. New Englanders harbored no illusions. "Innocent vipers" is how, one minister described children, having 14 of his own to submit as evidence. Anne Bradstreet, mother of eight, characterized one as harboring "a perverse will, a love of what's forbid / a serpent's sting in pleasing face lay hid." Yet for all their acceptance of the doctrine of infant damnation, puritan parents were not indifferent to the fate of their children. "I do hope," Cotton Mather confessed at the burial of one of the eight children he lost before the age of two, "that when my children are gone they are not lost; but carried unto the Heavenly Feast with Abraham." Another minister assigned children who died in infancy "the easiest room in hell."

Population growth reinforced puritan ideas about the family. When the outbreak of the English Civil War put an end to the Great Migration in the early 1640s, immigration declined sharply,. Thereafter growth was chiefly due to the region's extraordinarily high birthrate (50 births for every 1000 population, which is more than three times the rate today) and strikingly low mortality rate (about 20 per 1000). This resulted in a population much more evenly distributed by age and sex than that in the South. The fact that most New England women married in their early twenties rather than their late teens suggests that the demand for women matched the supply. Demographic realities joined with puritan expectations to create a society of nuclear families distinct to the region.